

## *Genus quid est?* Roman Scholars on Grammatical Gender and Biological Sex\*

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SUMMARY: From at least as early as Varro, Roman scholars and grammarians occupy themselves with cataloguing peculiar instances of grammatical gender. The practice, with little extant precedent in Greek tradition, finds the grammarians consistently placing great importance upon the identification of grammatical gender with biological sex. I attempt to explain this fascination with “sex and gender” by assessing ancient explanations for the fluid gender of nouns, and by considering the commonest practitioners of grammatical gender-bending (in particular Vergil). By dividing the world into discrete sexual categories, Latin vocabulary works to encourage the pervasive heterosexualization of Roman culture.

[*Francis I, on improving diplomatic relations between France and Switzerland*]

—I’ll pay *Switzerland* the honour of standing godfather for my next child.

—Your majesty, said the minister, in so doing, would have all the grammarians in *Europe* upon your back; *Switzerland*, as a republick, being a female, can in no construction be godfather.

—She may be godmother, replied *Francis*, hastily—so announce my intentions by a courier to-morrow morning.

—Lawrence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, vol. 4, Ch. 21<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The French “source” (*Ménage* 1715, 2: 214) that Sterne cites for his anecdote does not mention this confusion over *Switzerland’s* sex.

STERNE OFFERS HERE A TRANSPARENT PLAY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN grammatical gender and biological sex. Names of countries, regularly gendered feminine in the Romance languages, accordingly take on the features of females in both visual representations and the imaginings of native speakers. Just as it would have been unthinkable for a Roman artist to portray the personified city *Roma* as a man, so too does Francis's minister identify the king's proposal to make Switzerland a godfather as an error that will rile all the grammarians of Europe. Two assumptions underlying this humorous exchange will inform the following essay: first, that to equate biological sex with grammatical gender marks a natural and self-evident move; second, that the business of grammar has strong opinions regarding the historical validity of this first assumption.

## INTRODUCTION

I shall echo the practice of the ancient grammarians by beginning with one of their preferred research methods: etymology. The earliest extant attempt to locate the origins of the Latin word for grammatical gender, *genus*, dates to the late Republic. Varro derives the noun from the verb *generare* "to beget," since genders "are only those things that give birth" (Varro frg. 245 Funaioli: *Varro ait genera tantum illa esse quae generant*). As is the case with most of his etymologies, Varro does not resort here to metaphor. Indeed, we shall see more explicitly below the ways in which grammatical gender offers evidence for words themselves participating in a biology of sexual reproduction. Unlike many other aspects of Varronian grammatical theory, this etymology wields significant influence, reverberating throughout the lexicographical and grammatical tradition. The *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* lists nine direct citations, and a number of additional allusions can be found in ancient commentaries and scholia.<sup>2</sup> While modern scholars confirm Varro's conclusion that the word *genus* is related to the notion of creation and procreation, they do not consider why this finding holds sway over the subsequent grammatical tradition. I intend in the following to find a source for this fascination with reproducing genders.

Exploring what grammatical gender meant in ancient Rome is both the most philological and most theoretical of enterprises. It is philological since,

<sup>2</sup>TLL vol. VI, 2 1885, 28–35, with related etymologies from *γῆ* and *gens* at 35–43 (O. Hey, with fuller testimonia than Funaioli). See too the Byzantine commentaries on the Greek grammarian Dionysius Thrax, which do not refer to words engaging in a kind of reproduction (Heliodoros, GG 1.3: 361.29): πόθεν γένος; ἀπὸ τοῦ γείνω, ὃ δηλοῖ τὸ γέννω.

in the absence of any full discussion of fluid gender in Latin,<sup>3</sup> research entails poring through the corpus of the Roman grammarians, cataloguing the several hundred instances of nouns with variable gender and the opinions expressed about them by both ancient and modern commentators. It is theoretical at the same time since the ancient conceptualizing of grammatical gender offers an attractive model through which to understand aspects of human sexuality and constructed social gender. I will conclude by suggesting that the choices that the Romans made in essentializing the concept of grammatical gender, positing origins from nature that correspond with the workings of biological sex, form part of a heterosexualization of the world, a world of “compulsory heterosexuality,” as recent critics put it, that recalls the treatment of human sex and gender throughout Roman antiquity.

If one were to ask of a modern linguist the formulaic question of the grammarians *Genus quid est?* (“What is gender?”), the response would be something like the following:

Genders are classes of nouns reflected in the behavior of associated words.  
(Hockett 1958: 231)

This standard linguistic definition of gender is strictly formalist, in much the way that we might classify in English those nouns that form their plurals by adding the letter ‘s’ (one cat > two cats) separately from those that do so through the change of an internal vowel sound (one mouse > two mice). The Latin grammarians demonstrate an awareness of this type of formalism, often presenting nouns in conjunction with a pronoun—e.g., *hic vir, huius viri*, etc.—by which the “associated word,” in this case the form of the pronoun *hic*, demonstrates gender independently from the morphology of the noun itself (e.g., Varro *ling.* 9.41). As should even now be clear, however, I am interested less in morphology than in the semantic connotations of grammatical gender: how native speakers of Latin conceived of the categories of “masculine” or “feminine” or, in many cases, neither of these (that is, *neuter*).

<sup>3</sup>The most helpful general surveys are Wackernagel 1926–1928, 2: 1–51; Garcia de Diego López 1945–1946; LHS 5–12; and Renehan 1998. Lunelli 1969: 100–2n17 has bibliography on select issues, and NW 889–1019 contains nearly all relevant data. For individual texts and authors, see Catone 1964: 57–60 (Ennius); Koterba 1905: 136 (Pacuvius and Accius); Woytek 1970: 30–35 (Varro *Men.*); Tolkién 1901: 181–82 (epigraphic poetry); Jeanneret 1917: 54–57 (curse tablets); Väänänen 1982: 182–88 (vulgar Latin). It is worth noting that the new TLL CD/DVD, which allows a search under the lexicon’s category *de genere*, would make a comprehensive survey of fluid gender considerably easier (at least for those letters already covered by the lexicon).

The modern scholarly definition of gender given above, if strictly applied, implies that a word unaccompanied by an associated adjective or pronoun has no gender in that particular context. The elasticity of this definition proves especially useful for hybrid nouns such as German *Mädchen* (“girl”). Although morphologically neuter, semantic grounds frequently prompt native speakers, in informal contexts, to use the feminine pronoun *sie* (“she”) when referring back to the neuter noun (Corbett 1991: 183–84, 225–60). A common hybrid in the English language is “baby,” where the pronouns “she” or “he” are applied according to the child’s sex, but “it” is often used by those for whom the semantic fact of the baby’s sex is not essential (e.g., not the baby’s parents). This contest between semantics and morphology also appears in Latin. The comic playwright Terence describes a young lover, Pamphilus, addressing his girlfriend as *mea Glycerium* (“my Glycerium”). Since Glycerium’s biological sex is undoubtedly important to him, Pamphilus uses the feminine adjective *mea* despite the fact that it formally disagrees with the neuter gender of her proper name (Ter. *Andr.* 134; cf. NW 889–90; Wackernagel 1926–1928, 2: 16–17). As the fourth-century commentator Donatus remarks on another passage of Terence, Pamphilus has here “declined the noun in accordance with its meaning” (Don. Ter. *Eun.* 302: *declinationem ad intellectum rettulit*). None of these examples of hybrid nouns will occasion much surprise: each refers to an animate being whose biological sex prompts the violation of strict rules of agreement. Speakers and writers in Rome, however, could extend this practice to seemingly inanimate words as well, provided that sufficient authority (*auctoritas*) could back up the claim. I will touch upon the nature of this peculiar authority in the final section.

Grammatical gender can be found in many disparate language groups—not just in Indo-European, but in two-thirds of surviving African languages, as well as in several hundred of the native families spoken in Australia and New Guinea (Corbett 1991: 1–2). The major Asiatic families and most indigenous North American languages provide the principal exceptions to the universality of gender categories. Among several Indo-European languages with gender, including Latin, all three of the genders masculine, feminine, and neuter are active, whereas in others various additions to and modifications of these categories exist. Some Romance languages, such as French and Italian, have lost neuter forms, while in English the only significant expression of gender that survives is in the third-person personal pronouns, where the singular forms “he,” “she,” and “it” normally denote biological sex or the lack thereof. I shall return to this English exception in the conclusion. My discussion will concentrate on nouns in Latin, and in order to maintain focus on the sex and gender equation, I will follow the Varronian tradition in restricting my examples

principally to nouns with the ability to procreate: that is, those identified in the extant Latin material as normally masculine and feminine.<sup>4</sup>

Some nouns belong to intuitive gender categories. For example, the commonest Latin word for “man”—*vir*—is masculine and those for “woman”—*femina* or *mulier*—are feminine. But beyond such clear cases, matters frequently become less intuitive and even utterly baffling. The male eagle, *aquila*, is designated only by the first-declension female form, and the commonest vulgar term for the female genitalia, *cunnus*, is masculine while that for the penis, *mentula*, is feminine. When presented with cases such as these, the temptation to reconstruct situations in which gender assignment makes a particular point about sexualities is nearly irresistible. And indeed on a broader level, scholars have made frequent attempts to explain the assignment of words to specific gender categories as indicative of some sort of systematic worldview. Perhaps the most ambitious example of this quest for systematization is Jacob Grimm’s justifiably famous attempt to categorize notions of gender through, among other things, a comparison of the various Indo-European languages.<sup>5</sup> But constructing such a worldview for societies deep in prehistory must inevitably lead to special pleading, and the categories constructed often reveal more about the way the researcher organizes his or her own world than about the belief-system of early speakers of a given language. One can imagine the heady atmosphere that must have prevailed in Grimm’s day, when the notion of a Proto-Indo-European language was first raised, but simultaneously this headiness inevitably spawned much wild speculation. Rampant enthusiasm over reconstructing the earliest stages of language development presumably explains why, when the Linguistic Society of Paris drafted its bylaws in 1865, article eleven included the following provision: “The Society will accept no

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Pomp. *gramm.* Keil V 159.24–26: “If we follow [Varro’s] authority, there will be only two genders, masculine and feminine. Only these two genders can procreate” (*quodsi sequemur auctoritatem ipsius [sc. Varronis], non erunt genera nisi duo, masculinum et femininum. nulla enim genera creare possunt nisi haec duo*). Most post-Varronian grammarians in fact divide Latin nouns into not two or even three but five *genera*: masculine, feminine, neuter, common, and epicene, a division already found in the *Techne* of Dionysius Thrax (*GG* 1.1: 24.8–25.2; on this treatise, see Dickey 2007: 77–80). The categories of both common nouns (where gender depends on accompanying words, not morphology; e.g., *hic equus* for a stallion, *haec equus* for a mare) and epicene nouns (see the example of *columba* in the text below) clearly derive from a preoccupation with the relationship between sex and gender.

<sup>5</sup> Grimm 1890: 307–551, in particular 345–57 (“Personification”). Brugmann 1889 and, in English summary, 1897 counters that non-animate nouns obtain gender purely by analogy with the morphology of animate categories.

communication dealing with ... the origin of language” (Kendon 1991: 199). This scholarly backlash has filtered down into the traditions of classical scholarship, where standard commentaries on the Roman poets faithfully cite parallels when an unusual gender is encountered, and then pass on. Oddly assigned genders are worth noting, but apparently the uncertainties attendant in attempting to evaluate their origins are too great.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, the speculations of Roman scholars and grammarians remain unaffected by this type of self-conscious caution.

The first European who is recorded to have divided his language up into the categories of “males” (ἄρρενα), “females” (θῆλεα), and “things” (σκεύη) is the fifth-century Greek philosopher Protagoras.<sup>7</sup> The principal extant reference to his activity in this area criticizes the logic employed in assigning gender to inanimate objects. Aristotle reports that Protagoras accused Homer of a “grammatical solecism” for putting the introductory word of the *Iliad*, μῆνις (“wrath”), into the feminine gender, and he raised a similar objection to the feminine noun πῆληξ (“helmet”). Protagoras “corrects” Homer by maintaining that the two words must in fact be masculine (Arist. *SE* 14.173b [DK A28]). Although Aristotle is tantalizingly concise in preserving this information, it seems clear that Protagoras argues here for more than a regularization of morphology. It is possible that purely morphological considerations account for Protagoras’s mention of the word πῆληξ; exclusively feminine in its extant occurrences, the termination of the nominative in -ξ fits more closely a masculine paradigm. The same principle, however, does not hold true for μῆνις, for which both morphology and status as an abstract concept anticipate the feminine gender.<sup>8</sup> Instead, Protagoras wishes for language to identify consistently biological sex with grammatical gender and, by extension, to equate masculine ideas—such as Achilles’ vengeful wrath, or a warrior’s helmet—with a corresponding male gender. The same notion of semantic equivalence seems to underlie Aristophanes’ parody of these principles in his play *Clouds* (658–93), where the character Socrates unwittingly convinces Strepsiades that the gender and the sex of nouns must coincide. A man whose name becomes

<sup>6</sup> LHS 1: 404 (“die Stufen sind nicht mehr zu rekonstruieren”), (“The stages can no longer be reconstructed”); Sihler 1995: 245 (“most ideas on the question are necessarily very speculative”).

<sup>7</sup> Arist. *Rh.* 3.5.5 (DK A27). Aristotle himself uses μεταξύ to signify neuter; the term οὐδέτερον (Latin *neutrum*) first appears in the later grammarians.

<sup>8</sup> I follow here Wackernagel 1926–1928, 2: 4–5 against those who argue that Protagoras’s objections are either purely morphological, e.g., Gomperz 1901–1912, 1: 441–45, (for whom μῆνις requires special pleading) or do not reflect a fully thought-out system, e.g., Fehling 1956: 214–15.

feminine (Amynia) when you address him, for example, must necessarily have feminine characteristics (686–92). Strepsiades' existence in the world of the concrete and sensual makes it intuitive for him to expect such equivalences between word and thing. He concludes his lesson by objecting that Socrates' teaching is useless: “why should I learn things that we all know?”<sup>9</sup>

The Romans resumed with gusto this controversial dispute about the relationship between real-world sex and linguistic gender, as can be seen from silent poetic practice and abundant scholarly discussion. Before turning to some of these texts, it will be helpful to devote a few words to chronology in order to remind us of the great time-span that separates the grammarians and scholars that I will be mentioning from the poetic texts that they cite. The earliest extant texts written in an identifiable form of Latin date to the fifth century B.C.E., while the Romans themselves traditionally dated the origins of Latin literature to the mid-third century. This puts the beginnings of Latin literature about 500 years after Homer, who normally marks the beginning of Greek literature. In contrast, the extant Latin grammatical tradition upon which I shall be concentrating begins for our purposes with Varro in the late first century B.C.E., and then skips forward four centuries to a series of texts conveniently referred to collectively as the “Latin grammarians” (*Grammatici Latini*). These teachers and scholars, who for the most part are now little more than names, compiled their texts in the fourth, fifth, and later centuries C.E., but based their work to a large part on that of predecessors from the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E. whose works are now mostly lost, in particular the grammatical writings of Remmius Palaemon and Pliny the Elder.<sup>10</sup> When the *Grammatici Latini* discuss the use of grammatical gender in Latin, therefore, they refer to a literature written as much as five to seven hundred years earlier (the majority of whose texts they possess only in excerpts) and about a language whose origins can be dated an approximate two hundred years before that. It should therefore be clear that, in attempting to reconstruct what these grammarians thought about grammatical gender, I am not interested in the true “origins” of this phenomenon. These scholars clearly had no better access to such information than we do today. Rather, my discussion aims to offer reasons why they posit the origins that they do.

<sup>9</sup> Aristoph. *Nu.* 693 (ἀτὰρ τί τοῦθ' ἃ πάντες ἴσμεν μανθάνω;); for the intellectual context, see Green 1979, esp. 20. That even “Socrates” suspects that biological sex determines grammatical gender is shown by the ease with which he segues from male and female animals to “male” and “female” objects to names of men and women.

<sup>10</sup> Nettleship 1886. The attempt of Barwick 1922 to identify the *Ars grammatica* of Remmius Palaemon as a particularly prominent source has recently come under scrutiny. Cf. Schenkeveld 2004: 17–27, with bibliography.

## GETTING UPTIGHT ABOUT GRAMMATICAL GENDER

As the epigram from *Tristram Shandy* shows, grammatical gender comes up in unexpected situations, as the equation of grammatical gender with biological sex offers ways for people to make sense of the world around them. Another modern example more closely reflects the concerns of the Roman grammarians. In adapting to film Henri-Pierre Roché's novel *Jules et Jim*, François Truffaut chose to emphasize those features of the relationship among the three main characters that highlight the precarious uncertainties of sex, love, and gender. The following exchange, new to the film, occurs between the two male protagonists, the German-speaking Jules and the Frenchman Jim, who alternate, confusedly, often painfully, and ultimately tragically, as the lovers of Catherine:

JULES: You will note that words cannot have the same significance in two different languages as they don't have the same gender. In German, war, death, the moon, are all masculine, while the sun and love are feminine. Life is neuter.

JIM: Life? Neuter? That's a nice concept, and very logical too. (Truffaut 1968: 56)

Here the inexorable logic of grammar offers bemused solace that, despite appearances to the contrary, there does indeed exist order in the world of sex and gender (or at least German gender). This type of play can also sting—as the remark that “Life is neuter” seems to imply—and so it is appropriate at this point that I should admit my own personal interest in the subject. A fascination with gender has in fact plagued me since junior high school, and in some sense I owe my professional career as a classicist to it. When my peers in French class discovered not only that my French-Canadian surname—“Corbeill(e)” —was used to designate a wastebasket in modern French, but that the noun was feminine to boot, I quickly received the nickname “Toni (*sic*) Trashcan.” The following year I enrolled in Latin. A sensitivity similar to those attested by the above examples—and experience tempts me to call it an anxiety—surrounded the implications of grammatical gender in Roman antiquity. Two ancient anecdotes will convey the extent to which thinking about grammatical gender could get a Roman all excited.

The dramatic date of the first example is the early to mid-second century C.E. In his *Attic Nights* (4.1), Aulus Gellius describes a group of Romans assembled in the vestibule of the imperial palace on the Palatine hill to pay their daily early-morning respects to the emperor. As the crowd is waiting for the emperor to get out of bed, an excitable scholar is described. He has



raised eyebrows and a serious voice, with a look reminiscent of the official interpreter of the divinely inspired Sibylline oracles (*interpres et arbiter Sibyllae oraculorum*). The subject of his discourse? Latin grammar.<sup>11</sup> In particular, he expounds on the proper use of case endings and gender for irregular Latin nouns, and his exhibition evokes in turn an excited response and lengthy debate from a prominent philosopher of the time, Favorinus. Favorinus, whose notoriously hermaphroditic appearance may have made him particularly sensitive to a discussion about uncertain genders, immediately shifts the argument from the subject at hand.<sup>12</sup> What is really important, he stresses, is not the command of grammatical niceties but the ability to form a correct definition. In the debate that follows, Favorinus proceeds to define the Latin word *penus*, a technical term designating personal property, by quoting from a series of classical Latin texts.

The second example comes from a treatise written in the fifth or sixth century by an otherwise unknown schoolteacher from North Africa named Pompeius. As part of his commentary on Donatus's authoritative grammar of Latin, Pompeius has just been discussing how Varro's derivation of *genus* from *genero* dictates that there are only two proper genders, the masculine and the feminine. The exposition rapidly becomes less calm and conventional, until Pompeius exclaims to his pupils as follows (my translation attempts to reflect Pompeius's repetitive and awkward Latin):

hinc nascitur, id est hinc inventum est, ut possimus nos excusare, ut, quotienscumque circa genera peccaverimus, excusatio sit, non inperitia. puta si dicam 'haec' paries, possum me excusare et dicere quod licet mihi hoc dicere. si ... paries ... non generat nec generatur, licet mihi pro voluntate mea quem ad modum voluero dicere. (Pomp. *gramm.* Keil V 159.27–33)

As a result—that is, we've discovered from this that we can excuse ourselves of ignorance whenever we make errors regarding the genders [of inanimate objects]. For example, if I should refer to a wall (*paries*) as feminine [*which is incorrect*], I can excuse myself and say that it's permissible for me to say this. [Since] ... a wall can neither beget nor give birth (*non generat nec generatur*), it's fine to say whatever I want to say in accordance with my own wishes.

<sup>11</sup> Gell. 15.9.1–3 provides another example of grammarians on public display. For a chronological consideration of the social position of the grammarian, in particular his ambiguous status as both authority and object of ridicule, see Kaster 1988: 32–95, esp. 50–70.

<sup>12</sup> The precise historicity of the various views that Gellius attributes to Favorinus is much disputed, but does not affect my point here; see Holford-Strevens 2003: 98–130, esp. 99–100 (Favorinus's physique) and 123–24 (on Gell. 4.1). For the interest of Gellius's Favorinus in grammatical issues, see Beall 2001: 88–89.

There can be no doubt that Pompeius knows that the gender of *paries* is masculine and not feminine. The word is commonly used by Latin grammarians, at least since Varro (*ling.* 9.41), as an example of an inanimate noun whose morphology prevents its masculine gender from being intuitively obvious.<sup>13</sup> Rather, in feigning ignorance he seems here to be using a standard example to make a striking pedagogical point—a point that is, so far as I know, unique among the grammarians—that any given speaker of Latin may choose a noun's gender in accordance with his own will (*pro voluntate*).

Pompeius continues, again using traditional material to make a non-traditional argument. Like Quintilian centuries earlier (*inst.* 1.5.35), the grammarian cites Vergil as an authority who can assign genders to inanimate objects apparently at will. Yet while Quintilian emphatically teaches his pupils not to follow the poet here, Pompeius seemingly recommends Vergilian practice to his own classroom and reiterates that “we can defend ourselves” when mistaking the gender of an inanimate object since these sorts of gender do not arise from nature (160.7–9). His closing recommendation, however, retreats from this confident position, meekly asserting: “So if anybody asks us [about those genders] that do not arise from nature, we shouldn't say anything unless we have an authoritative parallel to back up our choice” (*si haec omnia ... interrogati fuerimus, quae non a naturali ratione veniunt, non ante debemus respondere nisi etiam exempla nobis occurrerint*; 160.16–19).

It is difficult to evaluate what Pompeius seems to be advising with this final assertion—are we to imagine that a student really cannot mention the wall (*paries*) of the classroom unless a ready quotation from an authoritative poet is at hand to confirm the gender used? Such harsh prescriptions on language use surely would strike even the strictest *grammaticus* as impracticable. Rather, the most probable interpretation is that, like the grammatical debate in the halls of the emperor recorded by Gellius, the frustration of Pompeius in his classroom ultimately serves to reaffirm what it would seem to deny. In the first anecdote, Favorinus is surely being disingenuous when he claims that a true philosopher need not be concerned about grammatical gender. Favorinus was well known for arguing in the Socratic manner and, within the debate itself, his quotation of Vergil most likely betrays an acquaintance with the controversy regarding the gender of *penus*.<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere, as well,

<sup>13</sup> The word *paries* was occasionally construed as feminine in Pompeius's time, giving another possible reason for his choosing this particular example; TLL vol. X, 1 387, 36–38 (P. Gatti).

<sup>14</sup> Gell. 4.1.15; Verg. *Aen.* 1.703–4 is also cited as evidence for gender slippage by Char. *gramm.* 94.24–25 B and Serv. *Aen.* 1.703. Favorinus's sophistic tendencies apply to both the historical character and Gellius's portrayal. Cf. Beall 2001: 88–92.

Gellius depicts Favorinus's familiarity with the technicalities of Latin diction (Gell. 8.2, 13.25, 18.7), and throughout the *Attic Nights* the philosopher demonstrates that "detailed linguistic knowledge was the indispensable basis of culture" (Swain 2004: 33). Indeed, the very fact that the Sibylline grammarian attracted a crowd of learned men, as Gellius says, shows that the issue of grammatical gender could arouse interest among the learned elite and become part of a verbal skirmish about intellectual (and social) propriety. As for our schoolteacher Pompeius, his diatribe against gender occurred in a context that had occupied grammarians at least since the time of Varro five hundred years earlier: the *de rigueur* topos of "uncertain genders" (*indiscreta genera*).<sup>15</sup> This theme, which accounts for a significant percentage of the fragments that we possess of the third- and second-century B.C.E. Latin poets, became a favorite in both the classroom and the scholar's study. Nonius Marcellus devotes in modern editions seventy pages of his treatise on Latin grammar and vocabulary to the subject, with terse entries such as the following: "GREGES is often masculine; Lucretius uses it in the feminine in book 2" (Non. p. 208.22–25: *GREGES, ut saepe, generis masculini sunt. Feminini. Lucretius lib. II: "lanigerae pecudes et equorum duellica proles / buceriaeque greges"*). In the sixth century, Priscian's highly influential *Institutiones* spends thirty pages on the topic in Keil's edition, and this scholarly activity culminates in Neue-Wagener's 1902 *Formenlehre*, which offers a compendium of the rules and exceptions for Latin gender, published in one-hundred thirty tightly packed pages. The brief empowerment that Pompeius offers his suffering pupils, therefore, is likely a clever pedagogical move that consciously winks at tradition to catch their attention and to drive home that learning correct genders is in fact essential.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the absurdly exasperated conclusion of his account affirms the importance of the topic: if you cannot support a gender by citing an authority, don't use the word!<sup>17</sup>

In contrast with so many other features of the Roman grammatical tradition, this preoccupation with the fluidity of grammatical gender seems not to be borrowed from Greek precedents. To begin with, very few instances of ambiguous gender survive in extant archaic and classical Greek texts. The greater stability of gender in ancient Greek can no doubt be partly attributed to that language's early development of the definite article, a part of speech

<sup>15</sup> Barwick 1922: 268n3 asserts that discussions of gender were part of the grammatical tradition by the first century B.C.E.

<sup>16</sup> I suspect that a similar pedagogical technique underlies Pompeius's momentarily "forgetting" the gender of *periodos* (*gramm.* Keil V 281.22–24; pace Kaster 1988: 157).

<sup>17</sup> Pompeius makes a similarly exasperated appeal to *auctoritas* when discussing the quantity of the first syllable of a given Latin word (*gramm.* Keil V 106.30–107.3).

that provided an unambiguous indication of a noun's gender in those cases when its morphology might raise doubts (Schwyzer 1966, 2: 28–29). Two factors account for the majority of those few instances when variable gender does occur. First, as in many other languages, gender can be used to create semantic distinctions. For example, the masculine form ᾠοιδός, “singer,” contrasts with the feminine form ᾠοιδή, “song” (cf. Latin *palma*, the palm of the hand, vs. *palmus*, a unit of measure; or *visum*, -iv. *visus*, -us).<sup>18</sup> Second, the gender assigned to a lexeme could vary depending on the particular dialect. The word λιμός (“hunger”), for example, seems to be uniformly masculine in Attic, but appears in the feminine in other dialects.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, a dialectical explanation for gender flux receives scant attention from the Roman grammarians, who consistently view Latin as a monolithic creation, variations from which offer evidence for barbarism. The only reference to dialectal differences in gender known to me occurs not in the grammarians, but in the rhetor Fortunatianus (fourth-century?): “native Romans use several formerly neuter words in the masculine gender instead, such as *hunc theatrum* and *hunc prodigium*” (*Romani vernaculi plurima ex neutris masculino genere potius enuntiant, ut “hunc theatrum” et “hunc prodigium”*).<sup>20</sup>

This comparative rarity—and observable regularity—of gender flux in Greek corresponds with the relative lack of interest that ancient scholars of that language display toward the phenomenon. The only mention of variable gender known to me in the Greek grammatical tradition is offered by Herodian, writing during the Roman Empire (mid-second century C.E.), who remarks that poets have the authority (ἐξουσία) to change a noun's gender. Interestingly, and particularly in light of an analogous tendency among the Romans, he notes only changes from masculine to feminine.<sup>21</sup> While the remains of the Greek grammarians are scanty and late, further evidence that this area received little attention can be found in the absence

<sup>18</sup> Wackernagel 1926–1928, 2: 14–15; Schwyzer 1966, 2: 37. The wider use of Latin in space and time causes there to be many exceptions to such generalities; see, e.g., TLL s.v. *palma* vol. X, 1 141, 61–70 and 143, 30–39 (N. Adkin). For examples in other languages of gender change affecting meaning (although not always morphology), see Albrecht 1895–1896 (Hebrew); García de Diego López 1946a: 143–50 (Spanish); Thomas 1956: 188 (French).

<sup>19</sup> Schwyzer 1966, 2: 37, with additional examples.

<sup>20</sup> Fortun. *rhet.* 3.4; the passage offers valuable early evidence for the virtual disappearance of the neuter from Italian.

<sup>21</sup> Hdn. Gr. GG 3.2: 747.19–26; Roman neoterics seem to have made gender changes in the same direction. Cf. Lunelli 1969: 170.

of Greek evidence from the more numerous Roman discussions.<sup>22</sup> Priscian, for example, who freely acknowledges throughout his work his indebtedness to the second-century Greek grammarian Apollonius Dyscolus, makes no mention of any Greek parallel for gender fluidity in his full discussion *De generibus*, although he frequently cites Greek comparanda throughout this section.<sup>23</sup> The other Roman grammarians are also silent, making it virtually certain that they found little or no material in their Greek predecessors. In the ancient exegesis of Greek texts as well, the few instances of fluid gender that do occur rarely receive extensive commentary; the remarks are largely neutral, with no perceived need for explanation. The scholiast's remark preserved for a passage in Homer's *Iliad* is typical. The full comment reads simply: "it should be noted that [Homer] refers to stones (τὸς λίθους) in the feminine."<sup>24</sup> When an explanation is offered, as in the *scholia vetera* to Pindar, odd genders are attributed simply to the poet's "own practice."<sup>25</sup> By contrast, the Roman tradition placed great importance upon how variable gender manifested itself in the literary sphere, attributing to poets an authority (*auctoritas*) that connected the practice with specific poetic techniques and intentions. As a result, analyzing the grammatical remarks on gender can offer rare insight into how Roman critics operated when working outside the tradition inherited from their Greek predecessors.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For a succinct survey of the extant Greek grammarians see Dickey 2007: 72–87.

<sup>23</sup> Prisc. *gramm.* II 141–71. For the closeness of Priscian's treatment of gender to Apollonius in other respects, see the discussion in GG II iii, 58–60.

<sup>24</sup> Scholia A to Hom. *Il.* 12.287b, Erbse 1969–1988; cf. Scholia Theoc. 7.26. My claim here is based on checking the scholia, in particular for Homer, where a comment on gender change would be likely to occur, and by checking word indices. Compare the twelfth-century commentator Eustathius on Hom. *Od.* 1.53, who attributes the Homeric practice to dialectical variation and adds that "countless (μυρία) such examples survive among the poets." He cites as his authority the second-century C.E. lexicographer Aelius Dionysius, whose involvement in the Asianist/Atticist controversy further indicates that concerns about gender entered only late into the Greek tradition. I know of no comprehensive modern treatment of gender in ancient Greek. Cf. the remarks of Schwyzler 1966, 2: 24n2.

<sup>25</sup> Schol. ad Pyth. 1.29a, 4.331 (τὸ ἴδιον ἔθος).

<sup>26</sup> Contrast Mühlhelt's 1965 contention that extant commentaries on Vergil owe everything "clever and useful" to the Greek exegetical tradition (136: "So ergibt sich das Paradoxon, daß, was zur Erklärung Vergils an Klugem und Brauchbarem, in der Substanz wie in der Wahl der Ansatzpunkte und Beobachtungsformen, gesagt worden ist, letztlich von Griechen gesagt wurde"), ("There results the paradox that every clever and useful remark used to explicate Vergil, not only in substance but in point of departure and form of expression, has already been made by the Greeks"). His monograph contains no evidence

These remarks on the contrasting ways in which the earliest Greek and Roman scholars viewed grammatical gender in their respective languages may cast some light on a noteworthy difference between Greek and Latin vocabulary. Comparative linguists have demonstrated that Proto-Indo-European (PIE) had two separate words to describe fire, depending upon which property the speaker chose to emphasize.<sup>27</sup> The strictly physical conception was ascribed the neuter gender, whereas the associations of fire with an animate, living force was construed in the masculine. What is of interest in the present context is that the Greeks adopted as the normal word for fire the form in the neuter gender (Gr. πῦρ; cf. Germ. *Feuer*, Eng. “fire”), whereas the Romans came to use the animate, masculine form (Lat. *ignis*; cf. *Agni*, the Vedic fire-god). An analogous tendency can be observed in the two PIE words for water, which again have both inanimate (neuter) and animate manifestations (in this case, feminine): Greek adopted the neuter form as the dominant word (Gr. ὕδωρ; cf. Germ. *Wasser*), whereas the Latin word is feminine and originally animate (Lat. *aqua*; cf. Goth. *ahva*, denoting flowing water). In Latin, the PIE neuter form of “water” acquired a specialized meaning (*unda*, “wave”) and, perhaps unsurprisingly, had passed into the feminine gender by the historical period.

In a note on Catullus displaying characteristically deep learning, George Goold exclaims “But enough of fantasy! The fact is that ambiguous genders in Latin have no literary significance but constitute a morphological problem” (Goold 1981: 234). Such an unambiguous assertion by a renowned scholar of the Latin textual tradition presents a serious challenge to the above remarks, even after Renahan’s careful defense of the poetic potential of fluid gender (Renahan 1998). I would like to direct attention, therefore, to what the grammarians thought was the *historical* significance of grammatical gender, outlining the statements, speculations, and explanations offered by the ancient scholarly tradition. When confronted with evidence of an unusual gender, these men typically approach the issue as a problem less of morphology than of biology.

## THE NATURE OF THE EVIDENCE

The literary practice of playing on Latin genders is likely even more ubiquitous than the hundreds of examples offered by our extant evidence would

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that the Vergilian commentators borrowed their many remarks on gender from Greek predecessors, nor have I found traces of Greek influence elsewhere in the Latin discussions.

<sup>27</sup> Wackernagel 1926–1928, 2: 15–16, following Meillet 1920 and Schulze 1934, esp. 194–96. For a modern linguistic account of this dual vocabulary in PIE, see Lehmann 1989, esp. 232–33 on genders (he does not speculate on *why* different daughter languages adopt different forms for “fire” and “water”).

already indicate. A number of surviving instances suggest that the manuscript traditions of our extant poets, as well as of some prose writers, originally contained peculiarities of gender that centuries of copying have regularized.<sup>28</sup> A particularly notorious example is Catullus's alleged use of *pumex* ("pumice") in the feminine in the second line of his dedicatory poem to Cornelius Nepos (1.2: *arido vel arida ... pumice*). The regular, masculine form of the noun enjoys support not only from the extant manuscripts of the poet and of the six grammarians who quote the lines, but also from a clear imitation of the verse in Martial (8.72.2).<sup>29</sup> An indirect reference provided by the fifth-century commentator Servius, however, has prompted several modern editors to import the feminine form into their texts. Despite the fact that every other occurrence of *pumex* in both prose and poetry throughout Latinity is masculine, some scholars justify the gender change on the basis of Servius's single testimony. It has been argued in addition that Catullus here may intend to allude to the feminine gender of the Greek word for pumice (κίσηρις). In this case, remarks one esteemed authority, the simple change of gender represents "an unobtrusive announcement of Catullus' mastery of Greek, with the implication that his work is written for readers literate in both languages" (Wiseman 1979: 169.) The ground rules that underlie this lively debate over Catullus depend upon a number of far-from-certain factors. The trustworthiness of the grammatical tradition must be weighed not only against the tendency for manuscripts to simplify texts over the course of transmission, but in particular against our own perception of the limits that can and cannot be placed on the resourcefulness of Roman poets. While modern commentators often choose to assume that unique authorities for gender fluctuation, such as Servius's lone comment on feminine *pumex*, reflect one of the admittedly numerous examples where ancient scholars either misrepresent or misunderstand their source, the many instances of fluid gender discussed below, and those present elsewhere in the tradition, should cause us to begin with the assumption that these authorities preserve accurate information unless there arises a clear reason to doubt them.

<sup>28</sup> In addition to Catull. 1.2, see the *apparatus criticus* of Winterbottom 1994 for Cic. off. 3.112 (*primo luci*), where the editor accepts, against manuscript authority, Nonius's unique evidence for the unusual gender (Non. p. 210.17); Gell. 6.20.6 also argues for a non-standard gender at Catull. 27.4 that is not in the MS tradition. See Thomson 1998: 273–75; Bardon 1973 follows Gellius.

<sup>29</sup> For the possibility that the Veronese MS of Catullus (V) contained the feminine reading, see Thomson 1998: 197. Goold 1981: 233–35 with Kaster 1978: 199n48 offers the fullest defense of the MS reading *arido ... pumice*, with an ingenious reconstruction of why Servius allegedly recommends the reading *arida*; see contra Renihan 1998, esp. 224–27.



Nevertheless, the simple fact remains that, despite all the feverish activity devoted to cataloguing odd genders, no ancient scholar directly explains why the issue appeals to him. While there surely exists the compulsion to standardize the Latin language, to establish and reaffirm rules of proper usage, this compulsion exists in continual tension with a recognition of the beauty and respect owed to Latin's innate irregularities, and a drive toward exposing what one text cryptically refers to as "the rules behind the irregularities."<sup>30</sup> Underlying the desire for uniformity and the acceptance of anomaly, it is possible to detect in these texts a deeper motivation than simply the urge to have students and readers learn proper modes of speaking.<sup>31</sup> One possible explanation of their efforts can apparently be ruled out: perhaps counter-intuitively, these remarks on gender are unlikely to be meant to aid students in the reading of the particular texts cited. The works of Ennius, the most frequently quoted of early Latin poets after Plautus and Terence, became increasingly neglected after the death of Vergil, and were either difficult to come by or perhaps no longer even extant by the fifth century, the period when many of the grammarians were writing.<sup>32</sup> Even as early as the second century, a discussion of Ennius preserved by Gellius implies that the poet's texts were no longer easily accessible or widely read.<sup>33</sup> Writing a century or two after Gellius, Nonius clearly did not consult directly a text of Ennius's *Annales* while he was compiling his work (Skutsch 1985: 38–40). Indeed, as with Servius's testimony over Catullus's use of *pumex*, the uncertainty over the accuracy of the information that these ancient scholars provide can reach the point where many modern critics would extend to most grammarians Skutsch's admission on Nonius that their words can only be securely trusted when independent testimony supports them.<sup>34</sup> Given the neglect of the early Latin poets as works of literature, therefore, the repeated notes we find on their fluid use of gender—Ennius is cited for providing an unc customary gender

<sup>30</sup> Char. *gramm.* 62.13–14 B, for which see most recently Schenkeveld 1998. On the place of irregular forms among the ancient grammarians, see Fehling 1956, esp. 254–58.

<sup>31</sup> On the grammarians as "guardians of language," see Kaster 1988, esp. the summary remarks at 196–97.

<sup>32</sup> Decline in popularity of Ennius after Vergil: Kaster 1995: 257–58; status in subsequent centuries: Skutsch 1985: 10; Jocelyn 1964: 282–86 (no positive evidence that Ennius or other early Republican authors were commonly read by the fourth century).

<sup>33</sup> In particular Gell. 6.2; more generally Skutsch 1985: 30–31, 448, 676.

<sup>34</sup> Skutsch 1985: 525, on Nonius recording Ennius's use of *crux* in the masculine (Non. p. 195.12–13: *malo crucei, fatur, uti des / Iuppiter!*), a gender also used by Gaius Gracchus (Fest. p. 136): "If it were not for Gracchus we should probably defy Nonius and declare *malo* to be the verb."



for approximately twenty-five words, Pacuvius and Accius for ten<sup>35</sup>—must be intended to provide some guidance independent of the explication of individual lines of text.

The popularity of the unread Ennius among these scholars raises an issue concerning the grammatical tradition whose very familiarity may forestall its direct confrontation. It is well-known that ancient Greek and Roman prose treatises on style often take their illustrations of correct speech and effective rhetoric from, in an apparent oxymoron, poetic texts. The grammatical tradition concerning gender does not provide an exception: the overwhelming majority of odd genders handed down to us by antiquarians and grammarians occur in poetry. One of the reasons for this preference is highly practical. While Roman prose authors may offer a technical writer clear examples of varying levels of style, there seems to be a very limited number of cases in which they seem consciously to be changing gender. The more conceptual reason for citing poetic texts involves the perception that poetry predates prose in the development of the language, and that hence its deviations from normal Latin vocabulary and syntax should be regarded with greater tolerance and even, for certain poets, with reverence. It is clear that the grammarians—and, we may presume, the poets—placed a great deal of significance in the malleability of grammatical gender. The next section of this essay attempts to reconstruct the scholarly notion prevailing in Rome about the possible origins of grammatical gender and to assess what bearing those origins have on correct expression.

## THE GRAMMARIANS ON ORIGINS

Four hundred years after Protagoras made his dramatic claim for the internal logic of grammatical gender by critiquing Homeric usage, another fragment of a great thinker presents an analogous assertion. The Roman polymath Marcus Terentius Varro writes the following in a lost portion of his treatise *On the Latin language*:

potestatis nostrae est illis rebus dare genera, quae ex natura genus non habent.  
(Varro frg. 24 Funaioli)

It is in our power to give gender to those things that do not have it by nature.

Varro envisions here a development of language whose outline is preserved most clearly in the *Ars grammatica* of Charisius, by which the Latin language, “born together with human beings,” contains minor inconsistencies that, over

<sup>35</sup> Catone 1964: 57–60 (Ennius) and Koterba 1905: 136 (Pacuvius and Accius) give full lists (without analysis).

time, specialists in the language are able to resolve.<sup>36</sup> In the particular case of grammatical gender, one commentator on Donatus's grammar explains observable inconsistencies as places where these ancestors "nodded" (Explan. *gramm.* Keil IV 493.6: *in his plerumque auctoritas nutat*). Although Varro's pronouncement of the learned speaker's power to change gender survives only as an isolated fragment, the context of the many ancient grammarians who refer to this statement makes clear how such a specialist is imagined to exercise his art.<sup>37</sup>

The category of gender that Varro mentions as given to nouns "by nature" (*ex natura*) corresponds to the modern conception of biological sex—the word for man is masculine, for mother feminine, and so on. In fact, in an apparent calque of the designations employed by Protagoras, Varro refers to the categories not with the labels that will become standard in the later grammatical tradition (*masculinum, femininum*), but with the specifically sexual designations *virile* and *muliebre* ("manly" and "womanly;" *ling.* 8.46). Over five hundred years after Varro, it is clear that the grammarian Consentius still considers gender as a grammatical category with ramifications in the real world. In discussing the application of grammatical gender to language, he begins in the typical way outlined above. First, the "natural" application of gender encompasses words describing males and females of any species. Then he turns to the *genera principalia* (the "original genders"):

quoniam ita <sc. genera> appellari coepta sunt in nominibus animantium, extenta res est consuetudine, ut etiam haec quae essent sexuum expertia masculino genere aut feminino genere censerentur ut aer portus terra domus. (Consent. *gramm.* Keil V 343.21–24; cf. Serv. *gramm.* Keil IV 408.1–3)

Since the term "gender" originated for those nouns that describe animate beings, the practice was extended by custom (*consuetudo*), so that also the nouns that lack sex would be classed in the masculine or feminine gender—for example, "air," "port," "earth," or "house."

Typically, Consentius does not proceed to conjecture what precise principles compelled the understood first-namers to assign for these examples the genders that they did. His list of nouns hardly clarifies the issue, since these seem to follow no predictable pattern either semantically or morphologi-

<sup>36</sup> Char. *gramm.* 62.2–14 B (cf. Isid. *orig.* 1.7.28: *cetera* [*sc.* other than masculine and feminine] *nomina non sunt genera, sed hoc nomen ratio et auctoritas voluit*). Schenkeveld 1996 and 1998 offers a new text, translation, and discussion of this complex passage.

<sup>37</sup> Funaioli 1907: 196 lists nine grammatical texts that contain variations of Varro's statement.

cally. The normally masculine *aer* occurs in the feminine in Ennius; *portus* and *domus* are masculine and feminine respectively, despite sharing many features of inflection. The word for earth, *terra*, is the only one listed that has a long tradition of having an “obvious” gender (Varro *ling.* 9.38 remarks that the noun is feminine on account of its underlying nature). The best that Consentius can conjecture is that grammatical *ars* followed some sort of *ratio*, some logic of what is fitting in each instance (343.30–344.3). Consentius, in fact, seems to approach the modern linguistic understanding of the origins of PIE gender: in applying gender, the earliest speakers classified the non-animate beings in the world around them into categories by analogy with beings that have true biological sex. Unfortunately, the basis for these analogies remains unstated.

In accordance with this impulse by grammarians to equate sex and gender, the exegetical tradition on several occasions attempts to explain how this sexed gender applies to elements in the world that we would consider non-animate. A striking example of the belief that nouns can “have sex” (in both senses of the term) is offered by an ancient scholarly note on Vergil’s *Aeneid*. In the epic, Dido is underscoring the insensitivity of her lover Aeneas by saying that the Caucasus mountain—a masculine noun—gave birth to him. Her invective provokes a learned comment in the Servius Danielis tradition. Vergil here has altered his Homeric inspiration, the commentator notes, in which Patroclus accuses Achilles of having a mother who was not human; but at least, he continues, Patroclus avoids inconcinnity by making the imagined mother a noun of feminine gender, the sea (θάλασσα). Yet Vergil’s adaptation is even more pointed, the commentator notes further. Dido makes Aeneas’s origin more incredible and unnatural than that of Achilles since she posits his birth as arising from a singular and masculine parent: “Dido took care to make more incredible ‘giving birth’ from a mountain of masculine gender” (Serv. Auct. *Aen.* 4.367: *elaboravit dicendo ‘genuit’ incredibilius facere de monte masculini generis*). The verb used by Vergil to which the commentator draws attention, *genuit* (*gigno*), commonly refers to both the male and female role in procreation, and almost certainly alludes to the Varronian etymology of *genus* from *generare* that Servius shows awareness of elsewhere (*gramm.* IV 407.39). A comment of Servius on another passage of the *Aeneid* finds a similar conflation of grammatical gender and biological sex. In describing the murderous rage of his enemy Mezentius, the Etruscan king Evander remarks on how this warrior “had widowed the city of so many citizens” (Verg. *Aen.* 8.571: *tam multis viduasset civibus urbem*). Servius points out that the verb “widow” (*viduo*) is particularly apt in this context since the Latin word for city, *urbs*, is feminine and it is therefore fitting for the noun to take on the

role of a widow (Serv. *Aen.* 8.571: *proprie 'viduasset' dixit, quia urbs generis est feminini*). Examples such as these confirm that the attempt to relate a noun's *genus* to sexual reproduction insinuated itself into the grammatical tradition subsequent to Varro as an explanatory model for clarifying the relationship between word and thing, thereby rendering it difficult to separate any random Latin signified from a sexual connotation. As Consentius makes explicit in his own discussion, "nouns don't 'generate,' but the bodies that are named [by the nouns] do."<sup>38</sup> Put in more modern terms, the signified enacts the sexual implications of the signifier.

These ancient scholarly reflections on Vergil should not be dismissed as the product of an outlandish antiquarianism. Dividing a language's nouns into sexual categories is restricted neither to poetic expression nor to ancient languages. A recent lengthy compendium of modern linguistic research into gender in over two hundred extant languages reaches the following conclusion: "gender always has a semantic core: there are no gender systems in which the genders are purely formal categories" (Corbett 1991: 307.) If we translate this finding into the vision that Roman scholars had concerning Latin's origins, then someone, somewhere, at some time, decided to designate a noun with a specific gender. Consentius's outline of how this assignment may have occurred aligns well with what modern studies have shown, namely, that a given gender would have arisen from a semantic notion of what the word *meant* in some sexual sense.<sup>39</sup> This insistence on correlating meaning with gender also explains an oddity in extant discussions. As I have said, variation in gender seems to have been an uncommon practice among writers of Roman prose. Nevertheless, the treatises composed "On Uncertain Genders" (*De indiscretis generibus*) often cite examples from prose authors. These citations, however, take a form that is distinct from the poetic citations. I cite an example at random: "CERTAMEN is in the neuter gender. [It is] feminine [in] the fourth book of Sisenna's *Histories*" (Nonius 195.29–96.1: *CERTAMEN generis est neutri. Feminini. Sisenna Historiarum lib. IV: 'iaculis celeriter consumptis ad gladios certationem revocaverunt.'*). At this point the compiler, in this case Nonius, does not cite a feminine use for the noun *certamen*, as would be the case were this example derived from a poetic text. Rather, he gives a noun form

<sup>38</sup> Consent. *gramm.* Keil V 343.16: *non enim nomina generant, sed corpora, quorum illa sunt nomina.*

<sup>39</sup> The discovery that Hittite has only two genders—animate and inanimate—has sparked debate over whether this reflects PIE or an anomaly in the internal development of Hittite. See Corbett 1991: 309 for bibliography. This historical issue does not have direct bearing on my discussion here since the grammarians always identify the feminine and masculine in Latin as discrete entities.

that is built on the same stem *certa-*, but whose morphology makes the word unquestionably feminine: *certatio*. Nonius alone contains over fifty examples of this kind of listing. In this particular instance, he certainly knew that the *-tio* suffix would make *certatio* a feminine noun, and indeed the absence of an accusative adjective in the Sisenna passage makes clear that he must be deriving the gender from morphology alone. Why then does he offer examples such as this one, which on the surface seems to claim speciously that a neuter form (*certamen*) has become feminine (*certatio*)? The understood relation between meaning and gender provides an explanation. For the example of neuter *certamen* vs. feminine *certatio*, the notion of a “struggle,” regardless of its morphological shape, has associated with it an inherent gender, in this instance the neuter. Although no extant text expresses this notion explicitly in regard to gender, the hypothesis accords with ancient treatments of the origins of Latin vocabulary more generally. Varro writes that an originally small set of words—approximately one thousand—constituted the elemental building blocks of the lexicon (*ling.* 6.36: *verborum ... primigenia*). From this basis, all other words, constituting as many as five-hundred times the original number, were created by adding various suffixes and prefixes (O’Hara 1996: 48–50). Just as this theory legitimized etymology as a tool for reconstituting language origins, so too could it be used to retrieve original genders.

Further support for a model that posits the semantic association of an original word as determining that noun’s true gender is offered by Nonius’s perplexing lemma for the word *reditus* (222.11–223.3). After citing Vergil for the masculine use of this noun, Nonius lists, in addition to the feminine *reditio* from Varro, two examples that are formed from completely unrelated stems, *regressio* (Cicero) and *reversio* (Varro). Even a scholar from ancient Rome would acknowledge that we are dealing here with nouns that derive from three distinct verbs. The only characteristic that these words share is their meaning; Nonius, using Vergil as his authority, claims that something about “returns” is masculine.<sup>40</sup> Examination of gender use in modern languages provides a parallel for this phenomenon of speakers perceiving the “masculinity” or “femininity” of non-animate nouns. In modern German, for example, the suffix *-mut* is no longer productive in the creation of masculine abstract nouns. Without familiar morphology as a guide, one study has shown, contemporary German speakers assign gender to a given compound in *-mut* according to whether it expresses “introversion” or “extroversion.”

<sup>40</sup> This explanation of Nonius’s lemma for *reditus*, as odd as it may appear, seems preferable to others (Lindsay 1903: 329; White 1980: 148–49), since it also accounts for the related phenomenon discussed in the text above.

“Introverted” nouns, such as *Anmut* (“gracefulness”) and *Wehmut* (“sadness”), are regularly gendered feminine, whereas “extroverted” nouns—*Hochmut* (“arrogance”), *Übermut* (“bravado”)—are masculine.<sup>41</sup> In other words, as for scholars such as Nonius, grammatical gender can reside in meaning and not morphology.

If we accept the hypothesis that Latin nouns had inherent sexual connotations, which it is the job of the ancient scholar to excavate, then let us make ourselves Latin schoolteachers like Pompeius, faced with an uncertain gender, but lacking the intuitive capacity to assign one. What do we do? In such cases, later grammarians had recourse to four criteria developed by Varro.<sup>42</sup> In descending order of importance these are: first, *natura* or the distinctions of natural sex as inherited by native speakers; then *ratio*, the application of morphology or etymology, which can be considered in tandem with the third criterion, *consuetudo* or “usage”; finally, when all else fails, recourse is had to the often elusive *auctoritas*.<sup>43</sup> The first category, that of *natura*, is most straightforward. As remarked above, animate beings with sex are easily categorized as masculine or feminine, as are parts of the natural world: mountains like the Caucasus are normally masculine, whereas its very nature, Varro writes, insures that we understand the earth as feminine (*terra*; *ling.* 9.38).<sup>44</sup> The second criterion, *ratio*, includes the rules and analogies offered

<sup>41</sup> Corbett 1991: 94, citing Zubin and Köpcke 1984, who are careful not to assert that their findings prove conclusively a correlation between gender and sex: “there could be a deep-rooted polarity in our understanding of personality and affect which influences the assignment of gender on the one hand, and influences our stereotypic attitudes about maleness and femaleness on the other” (94).

<sup>42</sup> The definition and application of these criteria differ throughout the grammatical tradition; my account in the text refers solely to how they apply to the assessment of grammatical gender. Discussions of the criteria in particular authors that go beyond gender include: Varro and Quintilian (Cavazza 1981: 143–52; Vainio 1999: 47–61) Charisius (Schenkenveld 1996: 27–29); Servius (Kaster 1988: 177–78). On their general application, and adaptation from Greek precedent, see Siebenborn 1976 *passim*.

<sup>43</sup> Barwick 1922: 184: “*auctoritas* ...; d.i. der Sprachgebrauch eines Schriftstellers, der sich weder auf *natura* noch auf die *ratio* oder *consuetudo* stützt. Er bleibt als letzte Zuflucht übrig, wenn die drei ersten Instanzen versagen” (“*auctoritas*...; that is, the linguistic usage of a writer that depends upon neither *natura* nor *ratio* nor *consuetudo*. It remains the final refuge if the first three criteria fail.”)

<sup>44</sup> On the far more ambiguous meaning of *natura* in other branches of Latin grammar, see Siebenborn 1976: 151–54. I follow Julianus Toletanus’s seventh-century commentary on Donatus (Keil V 318.26–33, ultimately derivative, it seems, of Varro’s discussion) in outlining how to determine the gender of nouns that do not have sex by nature (*ex arte descendencia*).

by the structure of Latin.<sup>45</sup> One indication of gender passed on by the *ratio* of the earliest speakers of the language, an inconsistent one as numerous grammatical works make clear, but one that modern speakers of gendered languages tend to rely on, is morphology. As one late treatise puts it with cautious optimism (but demonstrable inaccuracy): “our ancestors decided that nouns which end in ‘us’ or ‘r’ usually (*magis*) belong to the masculine gender” (*decreverunt auctores, ut ea nomina, quae in us vel in r exeunt, magis masculino genere pronuntietur* [Commentum Einsidlense, Keil VIII 235.36–37 saec. IX–X]). Servius joins in praising the “ancestors” for using gender to create semantic distinctions. For example, he notes that the *maiores* intended the feminine singular form of the noun *insomnia* (“insomnia”) to distinguish it from its neuter plural homonym *insomnia* (“dreams,” Serv. *Aen.* 4.9). Comparative philology and the systematic collection of exceptions allow modern scholars to create categories that may describe the language more precisely, but the basic morphological tendencies noted by these ancient scholars remain the best guide for the student.<sup>46</sup>

*Consuetudo*, or the usage of the educated speaker, has in Varro’s scheme an equivalent valence to *ratio*, although in contrast with these fixed rules, he is aware that learned usage is continually subject to change.<sup>47</sup> In the treatise *On the Latin Language*, Varro demonstrates his awareness of how an understanding of grammatical gender can adapt in accordance with the changing needs of human beings. Originally, he writes, doves of both sexes were designated by the formally feminine word *columba*; within his own recent memory, however, the domestication of doves has caused human beings to care about the bird’s sex and so the masculine form *columbus* had begun to be used for males (*ling.* 9.56).<sup>48</sup> Fourth and finally, there remain those instances in which

<sup>45</sup> Diom. *gramm.* Keil I 439.16–17, who lists Varro’s criteria as *natura*, *analogia*, *consuetudo*, and *auctoritas*. *Analogia* seems to refer to the application of *ratio* (Cavazza 1981: 140–53).

<sup>46</sup> NW 965 begin their discussion of Latin declensions with “Das grammatische Genus der Nomina sind grossenteils durch die Endungen bestimmt” (“The grammatical gender of nouns is for the most part [grossenteils] determined by case endings”) and then spend the next fifty-four pages qualifying the adverb “grossenteils” (cf. *magis* quoted above in the text).

<sup>47</sup> *Consuetudo* as practice of the *eruditi*: Quint. *inst.* 1.6.43–45; Char. *gramm.* 63.9–11 B. Varro frg. 43 (Funaioli) provides as an example of *consuetudo* conflicting with *ratio/analogia* the adverbs *mutuo* and *mutue*; usage favors *mutuo*, but *mutue* is more rational (*ut docte*).

<sup>48</sup> Discussion in Wackernagel 1926–28, 2: 26–27; similarly, Paul. Fest. p. 6 (*agnus ... apud maiores communis erat generis, sicut et lupus*). García de Diego López 1945: 136–37 lists analogous backformations of feminine nouns throughout Latinity.



no clear guide is offered by biology, morphology, or usage, those places where ambiguity rules, where “those who first gave names to things,” Varro admits, “made mistakes” (*ling.* 8.7: *et enim illi qui primi nomina imposuerunt rebus fortasse an in quibusdam sint lapsi*).<sup>49</sup> Here, Charisius tells us, the speaker runs to the “sacred altar” of *auctoritas*, that is, usage again, but usage by those who matter.<sup>50</sup> The Latin speaker, like the Roman politician, agrees in designating as the ultimate authority a quality at once perceptible and ineffable. To determine which practitioners of the Latin language wielded this authority, one is able to turn only to the ways in which the extant grammarians use the term. To begin with, and perhaps counter-intuitively, for the grammarians it is the *poets* who provide the overwhelming majority of examples of controversial gender. The usage of canonical poets such as Terence, Lucretius, and Horace is often cited with approval, but Vergil, who became a standard school text almost immediately upon his death, represents an ideal that is only rarely contested.<sup>51</sup> Again, perhaps surprisingly, the antiquity of a poet does not necessarily contribute to authenticity—the testimony of the nameless *vetustissimi* (“the oldest ones”) can be rejected, and the *antiqui* (“the ancients”) can be driven out by everyday usage, while the relatively recent poet Ennius is normally treated as a respectable anomaly.<sup>52</sup> Well-known poets of the classical age, such as Ovid, seem to run at best a distant second to Vergil, whereas the authority of others—including a group that one grammarian refers to obliquely as “the highest writers”—are ascribed authority that is “dubious” and “lesser” and “obscure.”<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> His example of a gender mistake is the non-existence of \**aquilus*, a masculine form for “eagle” (designated in classical Latin by *aquila*, a noun of common gender).

<sup>50</sup> Char. *gramm.* 63.3–5 B: *ubi omnia defecerint, sic ad illam [sc. auctoritatem] quem ad modum ad aram sacram decurritur*; cf. Prisc. *gramm.* II 169.6–8 on *vetustissimi* changing genders “by *auctoritas* alone.”

<sup>51</sup> Jocelyn 1985: 159n140 notes that “the first clear sign” of Vergil being considered a classic occurs at Suet. *Cal.* 34.2 and *gramm.* 23.4; Vergilian graffiti at Pompeii indicate that he was established in the schools there before 79 C.E. For Vergil as a grammatical authority, see Vainio 1999: 140–42 and, for resistance, see e.g. Serv. *Aen.* 6.104 with Kaster 1978: 199–200. For Quintilian’s understandable privileging of prose authors, in particular his distinction between *auctoritas* and *vetustas*, see Vainio 1999: 47–82.

<sup>52</sup> *Vetustissimi*: Prisc. *gramm.* Keil II 160.17; everyday usage: Serv. *Aen.* 10.377; a sample of the many non-judgmental references to Ennius’s idiosyncrasies: Gell. 13.21.14; Macrobian. *Sat.* 6.4.17; Prisc. Keil *gramm.* II 30.4–6. Dionisotti 1984: 207 discusses the grammarians’ varying use of labels such as *veteres* and *antiquissimi*.

<sup>53</sup> Ovid’s authority for gender: Char. *gramm.* 102.9–11 B; *summi scriptores*: Non. p. 229.11; *dubia*: Memmius at Non. p. 194.30; *minus*: Celsus at Non. p. 195.5–6; *obscurae auctoritatis*: Non. p. 229.11. See White 1980: 182–83. For ancient scholars, in particular Gellius and Servius, using such terms indiscriminately to prove a point, see Kaster 1978.



Vergilian usage can wield sufficient authority to cast doubt consistently on the gender that one would expect from the application of grammatical criteria (*ratio*).<sup>54</sup> Even Quintilian, who normally provides warnings about his fledgling orators trying to imitate poetic diction and figures, cannot bring himself to criticize Vergil's apparent lapses. In discussing how the orator should avoid solecisms in public speaking, Quintilian points out that Vergil commits what he calls a "solecism in gender" (*per genus facit soloecismum*) when he uses the noun *cortex* ("bark") in the feminine in his *Eclogues*, while using the more commonly attested masculine form in his later poem, the *Georgics*. Seeming to realize that his students might misconstrue the implications of this statement as a critique of Vergil, Quintilian immediately adds: "I don't in fact reprehend either of these uses, since Vergil is the authority for both; but let's pretend that one of them is incorrect" (*inst.* 1.5.35: *quorum neutrum quidem reprehendo, cum sit utriusque Vergilius auctor; sed fingamus utrumlibet non recte dictum*). Here authority does not help determine what preferred usage should be for your everyday Latin speaker, but it does allow the authority-figure, Vergil, apparently at will, to use whatever gender seems fitting.<sup>55</sup> I will close by considering what type of authority may underlie this peculiar exercise of poetic license, one that allows the transgression of seemingly immutable grammatical categories.

## CONCLUSION

The views that can be reconstructed from these grammatical and exegetical texts, while spanning several centuries, nevertheless share certain commonalities. First, grammatical gender rests on an understanding that some type of sexual essence inheres in certain objects, both animate and inanimate. Second, several authors allude to an early time when genders were fluid, and assume that their eventual fixedness arose from the authority of anonymous *maiores* or other "first-namers." Third, this same authority is possessed by certain poets, in particular Vergil, who can use an uncommon gender of a noun without being accused of either ignorance or error. With this summary in mind, I would like to close with two final speculations. I would like first to offer briefly a possible historical parallel for this concern for gender that lies outside the Roman grammatical tradition that has been my focus. I will

<sup>54</sup> Prisc. *gramm.* Keil II 141.16–19; Gell. 13.21 discusses how Vergil's command of sound allows him to ignore *ratio* and *consuetudo*.

<sup>55</sup> Quintilian characterizes this behavior as *ius poeticum* (roughly, "poetic license"; *inst.* 1.5.12), and recommends that his students instead follow the *auctoritas* of orators and historians (*inst.* 1.6.2).

then consider the broader ramifications that this fixation on gender may have for Roman society.

The lexicographer Pompeius Festus provides several examples from both poetry and prose of the existence of uncertain gender in archaic Rome. He stresses, however, that the phenomenon should be regarded not as an error (*vitium*) but as an example of “ancient practice” (*antiqua consuetudo*; Fest. p. 286). Once again we have, as with Vergil, the notion of an archaic manipulation of gender to which the informed have access. The authority attached to language in translating sacred texts provides a comparandum from another area of antiquity for this compulsion to recall earlier, hallowed, practice. Here the word-for-word style (*verbum e verbo*) of translating tends to take precedence over endeavors to translate according to sense (*sensus de sensu*). Indeed, as is famously expressed in Jerome’s 57<sup>th</sup> letter, the word-for-word translation of sacred texts serves to protect the translator not only from misrepresentation but also from being accused of spreading heretical views when the original text contains potentially controversial doctrine.<sup>56</sup> A wide range of practices among early Christian writers exemplifies these obsessively literal translations, practices that frequently result in lack of clarity in the translated text: individual lexemes can be rendered etymologically to create a neologism, or the syntax and word-order of the parent text are retained in the often unrelated new language of the translation. “The logical consequences for the translation of a text regarded as verbally inspired” can result in illogicality of grammar and inscrutability of expression (Brock 1979: 87).<sup>57</sup> Included among such practices is the changing of gender by the translator to correspond with that in the original text. As Adams has noted in the transformation of grammatical gender in the Latin Psalter to match the Hebrew original, “The imitation of Hebrew should not be put down to [the translator’s] incompetence in Latin, but reflects a deliberate policy of translation: the form of the Latin is meant to suggest that of the Hebrew original, which had of course the status of a sacred text” (Adams 2003: 273; see Ammassari 1987: 25–32, esp. 29).<sup>58</sup> In an analogous fashion, I suggest, Vergil and a select few other poets are deemed to have access to an ur-gender, to a notion of the original sexual connotations

<sup>56</sup> Hier. *epist.* 57.1: [*inperita lingua*] *obicit mihi vel ignorantiam vel mendacium, si aut nescivi alienas litteras vere interpretari aut nolui: quorum alterum error, alterum crimen est.* On translation *verbum e verbo* (and its variants), see further Brock 1979, esp. 78; Bartelink 1980: 36, 46–47, 52.

<sup>57</sup> For examples of the *Vetus latina* imitating the syntax of the Septuagint, see Mohrmann 1965: 93–94.

<sup>58</sup> Jerome changes gender in his Vulgate only as a concession to popular speech. See Meershoek 1966: 62–63.

of any given signifier. This ability to discern and therefore assign genders that may seem unusual to contemporaries both peaks and dies with Vergil's poetry. The instances of uncommon gender found in the post-Vergilian poets are not only rare, but they normally have a precedent in Vergil or another respected precursor.<sup>59</sup> For those students of Latin who study prose and oratory, or to those poets lamentably post-Vergilian—just as with those early Christians who are not working to preserve the original nature of a sacred text—assigning an uncommon gender is a fault to be avoided.

Vergil, then, marks the zenith of the play of gender. Some time before him, the Latin grammarians envision a period of uncertain fluidity in grammatical gender, while afterward begins the establishment of rigid categories of the masculine and feminine and, inevitably, of what is male and female—of sex. Can the implications of this imagined development be extended beyond the boundaries of ancient scholarship and reach out, like the inherent sex of gender itself, into broader areas of Roman society?

Monique Wittig, in her 1985 article "The Mark of Gender," discusses the role of grammatical gender in contemporary French and English as "a sociological category that does not speak its name" (4). Her discussion concentrates principally upon the absence of a commonly agreed upon epicene third-person singular pronoun in either language—for English, that is, the failed attempts to replace the common-gendered "he" or the cumbersome "he and/or she" with something equivalent to the French "on," such as that pariah of English grammar teachers, the pronoun "one." Her argument will be familiar because of its subsequent influence. By using simply "he" to refer to an indefinite grammatical subject, regardless of that subject's biological sex, language becomes constructed daily as a site for reinforcing sexual hierarchies in the real world, even in a relatively genderless language such as English.<sup>60</sup>

I would like to suggest that Wittig's approach can be applied to grammatical gender in Latin, but not in order to claim that the inherent structures of Latin allow it to serve as a tool for sexism. Rather, following Judith Butler (1990), I would like to suggest that the task of orthodox Latin grammar, to assign every word in a language with a gender that corresponds with biological sex, combines with the daily usage of writers and speakers to succeed in heterosexualizing Roman culture's world view.<sup>61</sup> As we have seen, the divi-

<sup>59</sup> This conclusion rests on examination of the comprehensive lists at NW 889–1019, and a reading of all relevant sections of the *Grammatici Latini*.

<sup>60</sup> Corbett 1991: 219–21 provides, with bibliography, an interesting analysis of the issue from an historical and linguistic point of view.

<sup>61</sup> Butler 1990, e.g. 11, 45–48, on sex being made "prediscursive" through language.

sion of the world into male and female begins with how Roman scholars etymologize the very Latin word that means “gender.” *Genus*, Roman students were told repeatedly and at an early stage in their education, derives from the verb *genero*, the verb describing the act of sexual reproduction. With the creation of categories along the lines of sex/gender comes a sense of order. And yet “to bring order is to bring division, to divide the universe into opposing entities,” and of course in establishing order the process of division simplifies, inevitably in the service of misrecognition of the original reasons for creating that order (Bourdieu 1990: 210). Beginning with an overtly innocent instance of etymologizing, one sees not only Latin vocabulary, but the dominant means by which Romans make sense of their world, divided into the categories male/female, masculine/feminine, active/passive, dry/wet, and so on. The injustices arising from these mythically stable oppositions need not be rehearsed here.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

- B = C. Barwick. 1964. *Flavii Sosipatri Charisii Artis grammaticae libri V*. 2nd ed. Leipzig: B. G. Teubner.
- DK = H. Diels and W. Kranz. 1951–1952. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. 6th ed. Berlin: Weidmann.
- Funaoli = H. Funaoli. 1907. *Grammaticae romanae fragmenta*. Leipzig: B. G. Teubner.
- GG = *Grammatici Graeci recogniti et apparatu critico instructi*. 1867–1910. Leipzig: B. G. Teubner.
- Keil = H. Keil, ed. 1857–1880. *Grammatici Latini*. Leipzig: B. G. Teubner.
- LHS = M. Leumann, J. B. Hofmann, and A. Szantyr. 1972–1979. *Lateinische Grammatik*. Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft 2: 2. Revised edition. Munich: Beck.
- NW = F. Neue. 1902. *Formenlehre der lateinischen Sprache. Erster Band: Das Substantivum*, 3rd ed. rev. C. Wagener. Leipzig: O. R. Reisland.
- TLL = *Thesaurus linguae Latinae*. 1900–. Leipzig: B. G. Teubner.
- TLL CD/DVD = *Thesaurus linguae Latinae*. 2005. 3rd ed. Munich: K. G. Saur.

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